

## ON RAISING THE DEAD<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, at Choral Matins on the Third Sunday after Easter, 11 May 2025**

Well, it's Mothers' Day and, in our readings this morning, we have two mothers. I was tempted to say "appropriately", but, on reflection, I determined that it was most inappropriate to do so. Nothing about these readings relates to happy families giving mother breakfast in bed or some other celebration. Our two mothers are widows. We need no reminding that, in the world of the Old Testament, and of Jesus, widows were amongst the most disadvantaged. Given that death was often regarded as a punishment for sin, a widow was not just unfortunate, it was a disgrace. Widows had no rights of inheritance in Hebrew law. A childless widow might possibly be able to return to her father's family, but this was not usual. If her late husband had brothers, one of them might take her in, but poor families could not afford to.

The Hebrew Bible contains many injunctions to care for the widow, a sure sign that widows in general were not cared for. In those injunctions, the widow is accompanied by the orphan, who equally requires support. We should not use this word in its modern usage. In biblical times, and indeed in our society until recently, this term meant "fatherless". In colonial Sydney, a widower could not have his children admitted to the Orphan Schools. Our modern social security system has a payment to those who are "double orphans", recognising the ambiguity of the term. It follows from this that widows were almost always accompanied by orphans. This morning's Psalm 146 endorses this:

*The Lord helpeth them that are fallen: the Lord careth for the righteous.*

*The Lord careth for the strangers, he defendeth the fatherless and widow: as for the way of the ungodly, he turneth it upside down.*

The conjunction of the ungodly with those needing help shows that in this psalm, "ungodly" includes "uncaring".

Both orphans in our readings die. One is described in terms that imply that he is quite young; he represents then the future security of his mother. The other son is described as a man, showing that he had already become his mother's support. Either way, both women were bereft. In each reading, the sons are restored to life. There, you might say, everything turned out OK. Happy Mothers' Day! Not exactly. All that happened is that the women ended up no worse off. Their original poverty and insecurity remained. And I have dealt a blow to our happy families fantasy.

Perhaps I am taking the wrong tack. Let's begin again. In our Old Testament reading, King Ahab has ascended the throne of Israel. He took for his wife, Jezebel, the woman who has given her name to all the wicked women who followed her. Both Ahab and Jezebel worshipped Baal and sought to kill Elijah, who was forced to flee. He came to Zarephath, a town on the Mediterranean coast west of Nazareth. Here he found the widow and her son. This is the story of the jar of meal and the jar of oil that did not become empty and continued to feed all three, Elijah, the widow and her son. Then the child died, but Elijah raised him. In Elijah's worst hours, God demonstrates that not even death defeats him. That is why, in this case, it is OK

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Psalm 146; 1 Kings 17:17-24; Luke 7:11-23

that the widow's situation is restored, even though she remains a widow with everything that her status entails.

About 35km to the east of Zarephath, is the village of Nain, about 8 km south of Nazareth. Jesus travels there after having healed the servant of the Centurion who commanded the Roman garrison in Capernaum. The widow's son was on his way to the grave as Jesus approached the gates of the town. What Jesus did next surprised everyone, causing the pall bearers to halt. He touched the bier, making himself unclean. He told the young man to arise, and he sat up. The commentaries note that the Greek word used was a medical term for one who recovered from an incapacitating illness. We note here that Luke was a physician.

Our 1 Kings reading says that Elijah gave "gave [the boy] to his mother". Luke also says that Jesus "gave him to his mother". The Hebrew of 1 Kings and the Greek of Luke are verbatim equivalents.<sup>2</sup> Luke is drawing a direct link between the two stories. This did not escape the crowd who proclaimed Jesus a great prophet. Neither did it escape John the Baptist who, now in prison, sent his disciples to Jesus with questions about who he was. This is in the very next part of the chapter. Significantly, no prophet in the Old Testament raises anyone from the dead, except Elijah and his successor Elisha.

What does this mean? These readings are resurrection readings, reinforcing that Jesus is the ultimate one who embodies resurrection rather than bringing it about.

Two crowds colliding at the edge of town.  
One led by Jesus, the wonder-worker,  
and the other by a widow with her  
dead only son. All her townsfolk surround  
her but nothing penetrates the sorrow  
hanging round her heart or the fierce fear  
slowly swallowing her unknown future.  
All the past—dead. The future does not grow.  
The seed she bore and planted from her life  
into the world has gone silent and still,  
like another woman's son, who soon will  
give His life like a seed is sown and dies.  
But for now, the crowds and their lives collide  
in resurrection. And her son does rise.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>, David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible): (A Theological Bible Commentary from Leading Contemporary Theologians - BTC) p. 104

<sup>3</sup> [A Resurrection Collision: a poem reflection on Luke 7 – Matthew Erickson](#)



*Elijah Resuscitating the Son of the Widow of Zarephath*

Louis Hersent

Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Angers



James Tissot, *The Resurrection of the Widow's Son at Nain*  
Brooklyn Museum